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ABSTRACT

English instructors working towards diversifying the curriculum, increasing multicultural discussions in the classroom, and encouraging interdisciplinary approaches to awakening consciousness can learn much from their students' interest in popular music. MTV and VH1 have special significance for students and can be easily incorporated into a paper/presentation at the end of a freshman composition course. Evaluations at the end of the semester show that this activity typically was noted as the highlight of the semester. The approach has two parts: (1) a 500-word essay explicating the lyrics to a rock song or a narration discussing the ways the lyrics remind a student of circumstances in his or her life; and (2) a presentation in front of the class, which is to last about five minutes and has four parts which are explained to the instructor in a prospectus: song (title and artist); specific meaning to the student; general point to be made to the class; and visual aids to be used. In short, students prepare a summary of their paper and present it in some interesting way. In one particular case, a student, while playing Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven," showed slides of himself and a friend, whom he has missed since his death due to an alcohol-related traffic accident. (TB)

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Laura Lambdin

# Lyrical Diversification: The Music Project

As English instructors working towards diversifying the curriculum, increasing multicultural discussions in the classroom, and encouraging interdisciplary approaches to awakening consciousness, we can learn much from our students' interests in music. Sometimes called the "MTV Generation," our students have a particularly heightened ability to cull depth and meaning from lyrics presented with colorful visual images. While we may well complain that MTV and VH1 have fostered attention deficit disorders, I believe that these cultural icons are here to stay, have special significance for our students, and can be easily incorporated into a paper/presentation with far reaching implications, not the least of which is an awareness that many social concerns (substance abuse, child molestation, family discord, etc.) transcend the barriers of race, sex, and creed. I have used the music project as an enriching finale to every Freshman Composition class I've taught during the past eight years, and I have never had a student who was unable to develop an intriguing idea for the assignment. In fact, the paper and presentation grades related to this music project are usually a student's highest marks in the class. Further, evaluation of my courses nearly always mention this activity as the highlight of the semester.

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The approach has two parts, beginning with the composition of the paper. For this assignment, students select a song that has some important meaning to them. They then compose a paper explication the message of the lyrics. The essay portion of this assignment, a paper of at least 500 words plus a copy of the song lyrics, can be an explication of the lyrics as poetry, a narration discussing the ways the lyrics remind a student of circumstances in his/her life, or a research paper based upon the song's theme (domestic violence, AIDS, environmental concerns). The papers should be turned in a week in advance so that the instructor is familiar enough with the content to quickly help rare students who falter during their presentations.

Next is the presentation portion of the project. Most students have limited experience with public speaking, so I go over the basics early in the semester, and then give ample opportunities for extra credit through addressing the class from the podium (reading portions of papers or presenting findings from small group discussion questions). The music presentation lasts about five minutes and has four parts that are described to me in a prospectus turned in at midterm (allowing me an opportunity to weed out any I feel won't work well or would be difficult to pull off): song (title and artist), specific meaning to student, general point to be made to the class, and visual aids to be used. Students prepare a summary of the paper and present it in some fascinating way. If they have done research, they might make a "facts" poster or pass out pamphlets, but most are more creative and involve making a video or slides, or using their singing, dancing, or acting talents. They have five minutes (including the

time it takes to play their song on CD or tape) to share an important message or personal concern with the class.

I am constantly amazed by the creative variations within the given perimeters, but a typical presentation might go as follows: The student shows slides while Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" plays. The pictures begin with two babies who become toddlers, small boys, teenagers, etc. until we realize that one of them is the male presenter. The last slide is of the other male in his coffin at a funeral. The music ends and student discusses how much he misses his best friend, Mike, who died because he was driving home drunk following a high school graduation party. The student tells his classmates that he realizes that they are going to party and then drive home, but he begs them to always have a designated driver. he then distributes pamphlets from the local AA chapter with statistics about alcohol related fatalities. Finally, he recalls that Mike always baked chocolate chip cookies on Saturdays for his friends. The student passes out Mike's recipe on cards and gives everyone a cookie.

These projects tend to display a student's self awareness and often result in a project reflecting ethnic concerns such as one I recently enjoyed because of the dialogue it stimulated. The presenter was a first generation African American whose parents came from Nigeria; he used Arrested Development's "Tennessee," a song about the difficulty descendants of slaves find if they desire to trace their roots beyond the deep South. The presenter distributed various Nigerian relics among the class as he discussed both his joy in knowing his ancestors and his painful understanding of the shame and anger that most of his friends of color endure because they only know that

their ancestors were captured and sold. The presenter's heartfelt perceptions of this aspect of our culture at a small Southern university went beyond the usual discussion of discrimination and brought tears to many eyes.

Although all of the presentations are different, and many of them are wonderful, it isn't hard for the student evaluators to be discriminating; they can easily discern the presentations that required the most preparation and effort. My students are given daily quizzes on class readings, so during the presentation week (when we move to a soundproof room in our media center because some presenters bring their own bands) the quiz grade is based on their evaluations of presentations. This helps keep the audience alert, involved, and judicious.

During the first year that I tried this exercise, the presentation portion went badly in two cases. The first was a young man who played the song "Me So Horny" by 2 Live Crew and stripped down to a g-string while dancing erotically (He was a male stripper at a local club, but I didn't know this before his presentation). His only message was that the lyrics described his usual state of mind. The second problem developed when an Indian exchange student chose to share her religious practices; she played a Zoroastrian hymn, and the class laughed because the high-pitched wails of the singer seemed so strange to them. The student had not been home to see her family for quite a while, and she was feeling lonely and vulnerable. She left the room in tears. I now remind students to have some meaningful message and to be kind audience members.

I also quickly discovered that many of us have difficulty operating the machinery involved (cd player, vcr, etc.). The presentations flow more smoothly if volunteers become the "technical director" and "assistant technical director," students who (for massive extra credit) control the equipment. I also select 2 volunteers to serve as the "clean up crew".

Because the students know that they will have to speak to their classmates and be evaluated by them during the final week of class, I find that my classes tend to bond well. This feeling is deepened during the presentation week, and the result is a very enriching experience. Students learn about each other's concerns, are introduced to music they may not have heard before, and get some practice speaking to a group. The exercise also reminds the instructor of students' sensitivities to various issues that often remain unarticulated in typical essays. My office shelves are filled with various doodads (a clown, sword, globe, flower, doll, etc.) presenters have given to the class to reinforce themes; these remain as constant reminders to me that the depth of Freshman students is not to be underestimated.+